

## A rising tide: the case against Canada as a world citizen

A generation ago, Canada was perceived to be an exemplary global citizen by the rest of the world: it took the lead on a host of international issues, including the Convention of Child Rights, freedom of information, acid rain, world peacekeeping, sanctions against South Africa's apartheid regime, and humanitarian and development assistance—much of this under conservative leadership.

During recent years, Canada's reputation as a global citizen has slipped, in recent months more precipitously than ever before, and in new directions. The Climate Action Network<sup>1</sup> recently ranked Canada 55th of 58 countries in tackling of greenhouse emissions. Results of other analyses<sup>2</sup> show a government systematically removing obstacles to resource extraction initiatives by gutting existing legislation, cutting budgets of relevant departments, and eliminating independent policy and arms-length monitoring bodies.

Canada's reputation is further undercut by its silencing of government scientists on environmental and public health issues: scientists are required to receive approval before they speak with the media; they are prevented from publishing; and, remarkably, their activities are individually monitored at international conferences.<sup>3</sup> These actions have outraged local and international scientific communities. A survey done in December, 2013, of 4000 Canadian federal government scientists showed that 90% felt they are not allowed to speak freely to the media about their work, and that, faced with a departmental decision that could harm public health, safety, or the environment, 86% felt they would encounter censure or retaliation for doing so.<sup>4</sup> These trends are affected by the Canadian leadership's view

that multilateralism is a "weak-nation policy", and by its embrace of what it calls "sovereign self-interest",<sup>5</sup> perceived as the conspicuous pursuit of economic goals and goals of resource-extraction industries. This world view is reflected in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's response to demands for him to end asbestos mining when he promised that "this government will not put Canadian [asbestos] industry in a position where it is discriminated against in a market where it is permitted"<sup>6</sup>—a response that cast a pall over all Canadian environmental issues.

Domestically, claims by Canada's First Nations communities (whose traditional lands and territories encompass many of the country's natural resources), that environment and livelihoods are being destroyed by the oil sands, tailing ponds, and pipelines used in the oil industry, have been met by the Government tightening the flow of information. In addition to muzzling its scientists, the Government eliminated Statistics Canada's long-form census (a key source of data on vulnerable groups), defunded the First Nations Statistical Institute, shied from adequately measuring toxic air pollutants, and engaged the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and Royal Canadian Mounted Police to monitor Aboriginal activists and environmental groups, subsequently sharing this information with industry stakeholders.<sup>7</sup> Revelations in January 2014, that the watchdog body mandated to oversee these agencies is led by lobbyists for the resource industries have startled even the most seasoned observers.<sup>8</sup>

Previously a leader in freedom of information, Canada is frequently cited for its decline in openness, most recently by the Center for Law and Democracy, in co-operation with the Madrid-based Access Info Europe, which ranked it 55th of 93 countries, down from 40th in 2011.<sup>9</sup>

Harper defends withdrawal of federal funding for non-governmental

organisations (NGOs) that are critical of governmental policy, a reversal of a 50 year tradition of non-partisan support for civil society, saying: "if it's the case that we're spending on organisations that are doing things contrary to government policy, I think that is an inappropriate use of taxpayer's money and we'll look to eliminate it."<sup>10</sup> Consistent with this logic, the Government was able to continue funding NGOs skeptical of global warming and supportive of the asbestos industries.<sup>6</sup>

As for proscribing a way forward, it makes no sense to make recommendations that presume a level of political commitment that does not exist. However, if "self-interest"<sup>5</sup> is the motivating force behind this Government's actions, it ought to develop and implement a global health strategy. Such a strategy would help set priorities, guide decision-making, and create efficiency and cooperation. A global health strategy would also prompt greater fairness and, with less to hide, greater transparency.

I declare that I have no competing interests.

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